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ANANDA K. COOMARASVAMY

SOME ANCIENT ELEMENTS IN INDIAN DECORATIVE ART

WITH 21 FIGURES

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SOME ANCIENT ELEMENTS IN INDIAN DECORATIVE ART.

BY ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY.

It was long believed that the three great culture areas of Asia — Asia Minor and Persia, India, and China and Japan — developed from almost entirely independent origins. More recent research has proved their close connection with each other and with the Mediterranean. The Asiatic civilisations can no longer be regarded as isolated phenomena, but, like that of Greece itself, are further developments of an old and widely-diffused world-culture[1].

This old world-culture was built up from Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Mediterranean elements, with still older neolithic survivals. In decorative art the Egyptian element predominates[2]. There is no evidence of very early contributions from either India or China; prehistoric movements appear to have taken place in the opposite direction.

Trading communications, for the part most indirect, the goods passing through many hands, united this old civilised world: "intercourse between the civilised continental societies of Africa and Asia on the one hand, and Aegean societies on the other, was far more frequent and close in the prehistoric period than it would be again till comparatively late in the historic age"[3].

The most important Asiatic trade routes must have been: from the Aegean *via* the Caucasus and Baktria to India and China; from Egypt through Syria to Mesopotamia, and from Mesopotamia through Persia to India, and by sea *via* the Persian gulf; from Egypt to India by sea; from India by sea to the Malay archipelago and perhaps to China.

There is more or less evidence to show that movements took place along some or all of these routes as far back as 3000 B. C.[4]; and where such evidence is little more than inference, it is well to remember that in all cases direct or indirect intercourse must have long preceded the clear literary proof.

At any rate, there was ample opportunity for the wide diffusion of the world-culture of 1500—500 B. C. To take a special case, we know that early Mediter-

[1] Münsterberg, Chinesische Kunstgeschichte, vol. I, 1910, p. 7. Goblet d'Alviella, La Migration des Symboles, 1891, p. 307.

[2] Flinders Petrie, Egyptian Decorative Art, 1895, p. 6.

[3] Hogarth, Ionia and the East, 1909, p. 27.

[4] Kennedy, The Early Commerce of India with Babylon, J. R. A. S., 1898. Belck, Die Erfinder der Eisentechnik, Zeit. für Ethn. vol. 42, 1910. Sayce, Hibbert Lectures, 1887; and other references conveniently summarised in Mukerji, History of Indian Shipping, 1912.

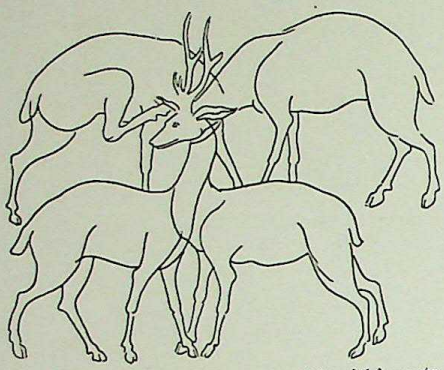


Fig. 1. Four Deer. From a goldsmith's note-book, Tanjore, XXth century.

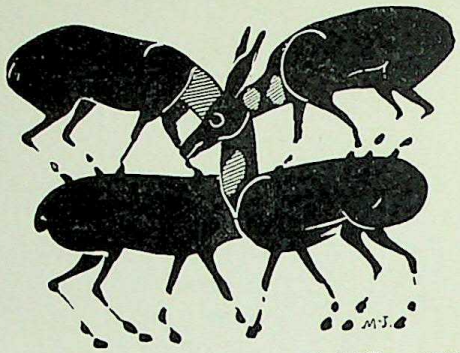


Fig. 2. Four Deer. From a Chalcidian vase (Louvre), VIth century B. C. Morin Jean, Le Dessin des Animaux en Grèce, fig. 154.

ranean motifs — particularly the fret and primitive 'cloud' — had reached China already in the second millennium B. C.[1]

This basis of the later Greek and Asiatic arts, and indeed, the alphabet of all decorative art after 500 B. C., may be called Early Asiatic[2].

For Egypt "is far more Asiatic than African"[3], and "Crete was as much a part of the East in the Minoan age as Constantinople is today"[4], and it is these two, with Asia Minor and Mesopotamia, that are the fecund centres of that old art.

From actual remains, we know practically nothing of Indian art before the time of Buddha. Yet it is not to be doubted that such an art existed, since India was already civilised. This old Indian art must, further, have been of the Early Asiatic type; for if not, how is it that no traces of any other art survive in folk tradition, and how could it have been (since communications were already freely established) that Early Asiatic art obtained no foothold in India? On the contrary, I am convinced that the old Indian decorative art which existed before the time of Buddha survives (side by side with later developments, reinforcements and additions) unchanged in modern folk design. It is the purpose of these notes to illustrate, in particular, the parallels with old Aegean art of the sixth century B. C. and earlier.

It should be noted that the Indian art before Buddha, the Indian phase, that is, of Early Asiatic art, should not be described as Vedic; for it did not originate with the Vedic Aryans, and must have been already well developed in Southern India

[1] Münsterberg, loc. cit., p. 21.

[2] Nivedita, preface to Okakura Kakuzo, Ideals of the East, ed. 2, 1904: "the common early Asiatic art which has left its uttermost ripplemarks alike on the shores of Hellas, the extreme west of Ireland, Etruria, Phoenicia, Egypt, India and China." Asia was not "the congeries of geographical fragments that we imagined, but a united living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complex life".

[3] Hommel, Civilisation of the East, 1900, p. 2.

[4] Burrows, The Discoveries in Crete, 1907, p. 135.

Fig. 4. Two Lions. Sinhalese drawing, XXth century.

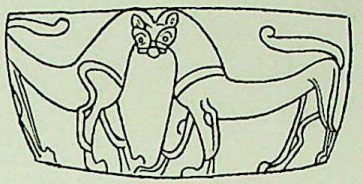


Fig. 5. Two Lions. Etrusco-Jonian vase, VIth century B. C. Morin Jean, loc. cit. fig. 175.

before the Aryans had penetrated so far. It is noteworthy in this connection that some of the most typical features of Indian architecture go back to primitive aboriginal sources. The Aryans did not bring any developed architecture with them; their buildings were of post and thatch, their towns merely stockaded. They had ornaments of gold and weapons and tools of copper and bronze; but it is doubtful if they were acquainted with silver and bronze. Few of their arts, and probably none of their decoration were at first advanced beyond a neolithic stage. The dependence of the Aryans on aboriginal craftsmanship is reflected in the classification of most craftsmen as Śūdras. Thus the pre-Buddhist Indian art must be considered as Dravidian in character, and the evidence supports the contention of Fergusson, based on a study of architecture, that Indian art is essentially non-Aryan[1].

No one examining the Four Deer of Fig. 1 and the Four Deer of Fig. 2, would suspect that these designs were separated by two and a half millenniums in time and five thousand miles in space. Yet one is Aegean (Chalcis) of the sixth century B. C., the other Indian (Tanjore) of the twentieth century A. D. If such an instance stood alone, one would be tempted to suspect the Tanjore goldsmiths of studying the Greek vases in the Louvre; but it belongs to a whole group of equally striking similarities. Even this same motif occurs in the round on a Tanjore metal comb (Fig. 3) of the XVIIth or XVIIIth century.

At this point, it may be noted that in pointing out Aegean parallels for Indian motifs, I do not always mean to predicate Aegean origins; for both may derive from older common sources in Western Asia. I wish rather to show that a certain stratum in Indian decorative art represents a common inheritance shared alike by all countries from the Aegean to Ceylon. It is of this very motif of Four Deer, for example, that M. Morin Jean remarks

"Influencés sans doute par quelque étoffe orientale, les Chalcidiens ont constitué un ensemble très décoratif par la réunion de quatre quadrupedes n'ayant qu'une seule tête". He adds "La filiation de cette figure décorative peut se suivre jusqu'à nos jours"[2].

[1] Indian architecture, ed. 2, vol. 1, p. 308.
[2] Le Dessin des Animaux en Grèce, 1911, p. 139.

Fig. 7. Birds affronted, with 'Sacred Tree'.
Sinhalese bone comb, XVIIIth century.

Fig. 6. Silver Toothpick.
Goat with head turned back:
Sinhalese XVIIIth century.

Fig. 3. Four Deer.
Brass comb, Tanjore,
XVIIth—XVIIIth century.
Indian museum,
S. Kensington.

To take another case, we have a Tanjore design of Three Lions[1] with one head, and a very similar Persian version[2] of Four Lions with one head; it will not be at all surprising if the very same motif turns up on some old Aegean vase. And if we turn to designs of only two lions with a single head, the parallels are already familiar (Figs. 4, 5).

We shall also discover striking analogies in the representation of single animals in side view, in three ways, with the head forward, in full face, and turned to look behind (Fig. 6); animal processions; pairs of animals addorsed or affronted (Fig. 7); animal combats; and single birds or animals with two heads, beside the many-headed *nāga*[3] comparable with the Greek hydra. For several of these again, a common origin in Western Asia is more likely than a direct derivation from the Aegean.

Fig. 8. Manasā Devī. Bengali brass figure, XIXth century. Coll. E.S.W. Russell, Calcutta.

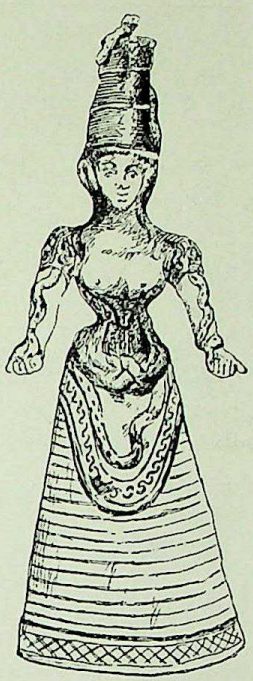


Fig. 9. The Cretan Snake-goddess. Mosso, 'The Palaces of Crete', Fig. 134.

There are not a few remarkable parallels between the old Indian and Mediterranean cultures in the domain of myth and cult. I shall only refer to two of which there are representations in art. One is the worship of Mother Earth (Gaea, and Bhūmi Devī); there are respresentations of her, half emerging from the ground, in late Sinhalese Buddhist art (on the occasion of Buddha's 'Calling the Earth to Witness', *bhūmi-sparsa mudrā*), which strikingly recall those on old Greek vases. But a more striking parallel is seen in the case of the Bengālī Snake-Goddess. Babu Dinesh Chandra Sen[4] has already called attention to this analogy on its literary side; but the Bengālī figure of Manasā Devī here illustrated (Fig. 8) is so like the Cretan snake-goddess (Fig. 9) that no one could have been surprised if that

[1] Coomaraswamy, Indian Drawings (I), 1910.

[2] Martin, The Miniature Painters of Persia, India, and Turkey, Pl. 164 (Persian drawing dated 1677 A. D.).

[3] Ostasiatische Zeitschrift, I, p. 131, Fig. 3.

[4] History of Bengali Literature, 1912, pp. 251—253.

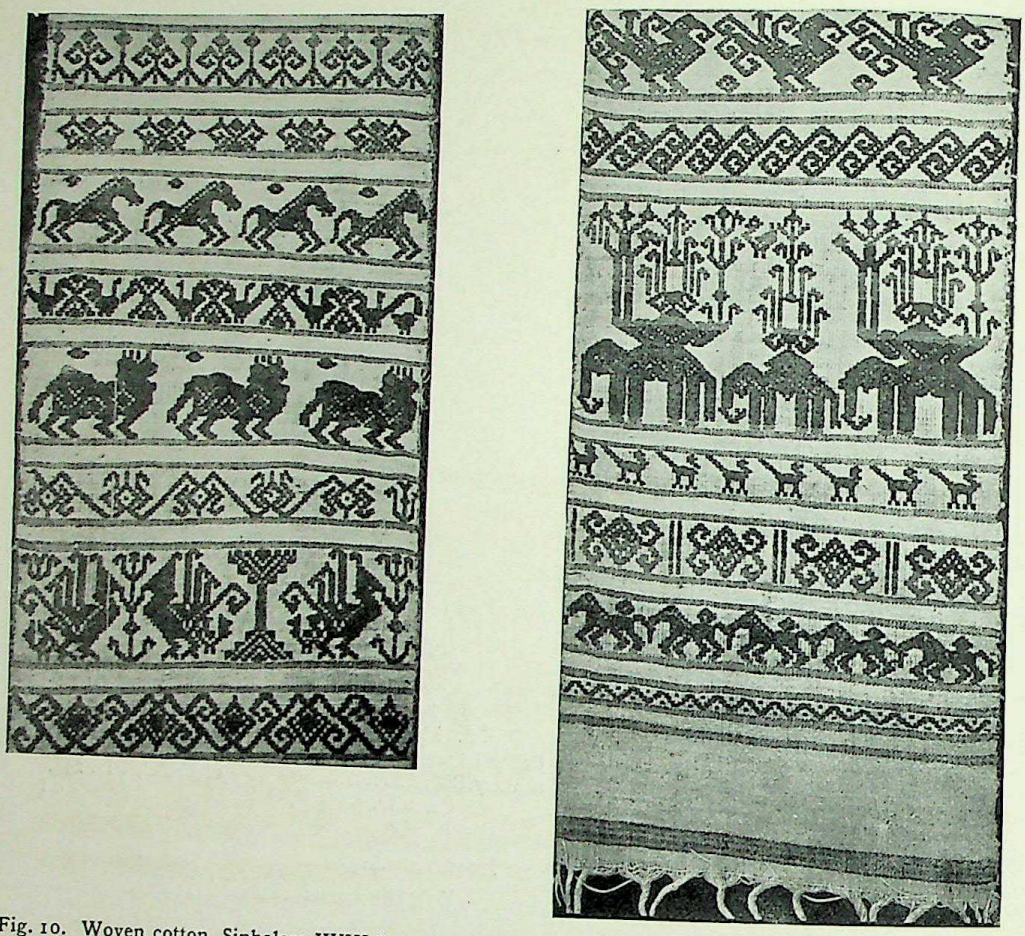


Fig. 10. Woven cotton, Sinhalese XVIIIth century; showing volutes and other blue lotus motifs, and animal processions, and animals affronted with 'Sacred Tree', also Fret and Chevron.

very figure had been found in Crete itself. The pose is nearly identical, and the flounced skirt is no less suggestive of ancient Crete.

We see clearly that India exhibits a conservatism of design fully as strong as that of cult and folklore. We are forced also to reflect how closely knit together by common modes of thought must have been that whole ancient world of 1000 B. C. It is a portion of that ancient world that survives before our eyes in the folk traditions of modern India; they have preserved for us, side by side with other and more splendid developments, an aspect of history which has almost everywhere else disappeared for ever.

I turn now to the lotus motifs in Indian decorative art. These at once fall into two groups, those of the blue lotus (Nymphaea) and those of the rose lotus (Nelum-

bium). The rose lotus forms the basis of all the *obvious* lotus motifs in Indian decorative art, and is always understood by the craftsmen as representing a lotus, even in the most conventional rosette forms. A very important rose lotus motif is the lotus petal moulding and border, so constant in Dravidian and Sinhalese architecture and ornament. The direct origin of this motif from the expanded rose lotus is wellknown, and must date back to the time when the rose lotus seat or footstool was first recognized as a symbol of divinity. There is no more purely indigenous Indian motif than this. As such, little need be said of it at present, except to suggest that a corresponding form, the 'egg and dart', occurs in Hellenistic Greece. One cannot regard Goodyear's derivation of this as in any way convincing. There is nothing like it in Egypt, the early Aegean, Syria or Babylonia; and when it occurs in Greece, it is, like the (blue) lotus motifs from Egypt, already misunderstood, and treated quite mechanically. It seems just possible that the Hellenistic 'egg and dart' may be ultimately traceable to the Indian lotus petal moulding.

Fig. 11. 'Honeysuckle' decoration of earthenware incised, with white filling. Sinhalese, XXth century.

Fig. 12. Decoration of earthenware, showing 'half-palmettes'. Sinhalese, XXth century.

If the rose lotus is the basis of much of the indigenous Indian design, it is otherwise with the motifs of blue lotus origin; for these were used by the Indians, as by the Greeks, without knowledge of their real character. In this fact lies the proof of the extra-Indian derivation of all such blue lotus motifs as the 'lotus and palmette', 'knop and flower', 'half-palmette', 'acanthus', 'honeysuckle' and 'volute'. It will

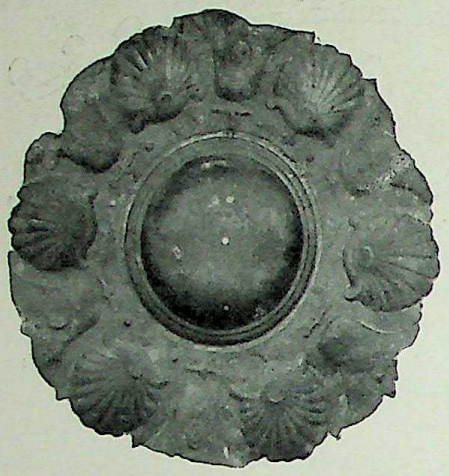


Fig. 13. Part of a bronze lamp, showing 'lotus and palmette'. Sinhalese, anterior to Xth century A. D. Colombo museum.

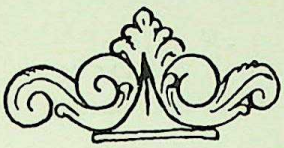
suffice to illustrate a number of Indian examples of these to show how close are the analogies with the Mediterranean types[1] (Figs. 10—15).

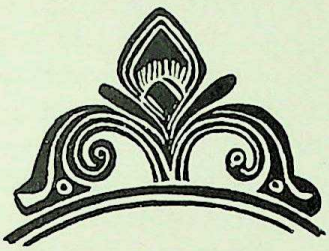
The parallels in geometrical ornament are of the same kind. We find in Indo-Sinhalese folk art the spiral, and all stages of its evolution into the continuous stem (Figs. 16 and 17); its rectangular phase, the fret (Fig. 18); the same as a space filling maeander; the swastika; the labyrinth (Figs. 19 and 20); strap-work; guilloche; chevron, stripe, circle and dot; and a variety of checks and diapers. Many of these can be paralleled in Aegean art; but of these, not a few are at least as old as the neolithic culture of Europe, and they may have originated anywhere. The spiral, in particular, may have been independently discovered in more than one area. As an assemblage, nevertheless, the Aegean aspect of the whole group is most striking. The labyrinth, which has such special associations with Crete, may be specially remarked.

It will be noticed that amongst these patterns, there are few or none that suggest a direct Egyptian source. The absence of the winged globe and the *crux ansata* confirm the conclusion that there can have been but little communication of designs *via* the Red Sea before the historic period. When we do first meet with evidence of influences passing by this way, it is rather in the opposite direction. The comparison, for example, is striking between the floral trellis of Pompeii[2] — the first appearance of this motif, as distinguished from merely geometrical diapers in the Mediterranean area — and such a design as that of Fig. 21. Indian influence on Roman art has already been suggested in connection with the occurrence of balconies and bow-windows at Pompeii[3].

It may still be suggested by some that the assemblage of motifs here discussed came to India with Alexander, or represent a survival of Greeko-Buddhist art of Gandhara. Alexander's raid, however, was nothing but a raid. As for Gandhara, in the first place the present assemblage of motifs is quite unlike that which occurs in the actual Gandhara carvings, while its correspondences are with the Aegean art of at least six centuries earlier. The Gandhara art, moreover, is a local product

[1] For the analogies, see Goodyear, Grammar of the Lotus, passim.
[2] Riegl, Stilfragen, Fig. 171.
[3] Beylié, L'Architecture Hindoue en extrême Orient, p. 50.





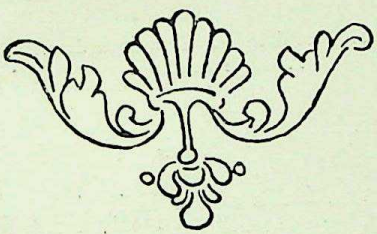


Fig. 14. Volutes, from Sinhalese and Indian earthen and metal ware, XVIIth —XVIIIth century.

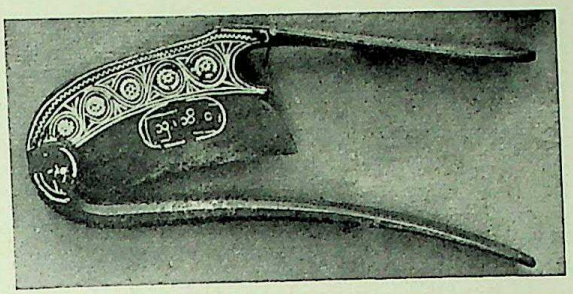


Fig. 16. Continuous stem and 'half-palmette' motif; Sinhalese damascened steel *giraya*, XIXth century.

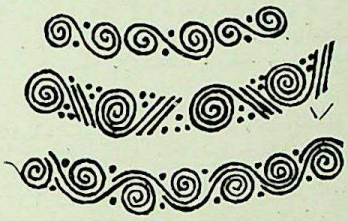


Fig. 17. Spirals, and transition to continuous stem. Sinhalese metal work. XVIIIth century.

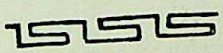


Fig. 18. Fret. Indian metal work (*bidrī*), XVIIth century.

Fig. 15. Diagonal palmette: lotus and palmette. From Indian metal ware (*bidrī*), XVIIth century.

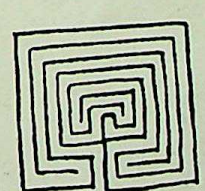


Fig. 19. Labyrinth from a Cretan coin. After Lethaby.

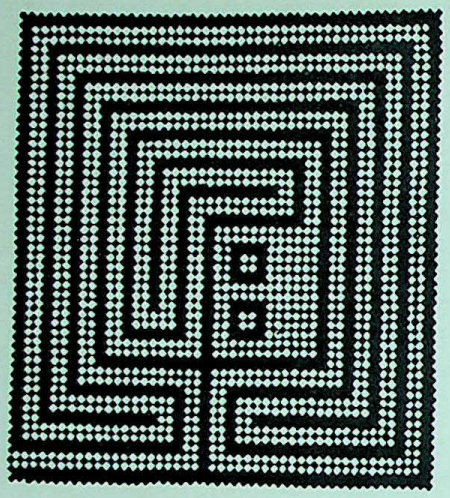


Fig. 20. Labyrinth, from a Sinhalese woven grass mat, XXth century.

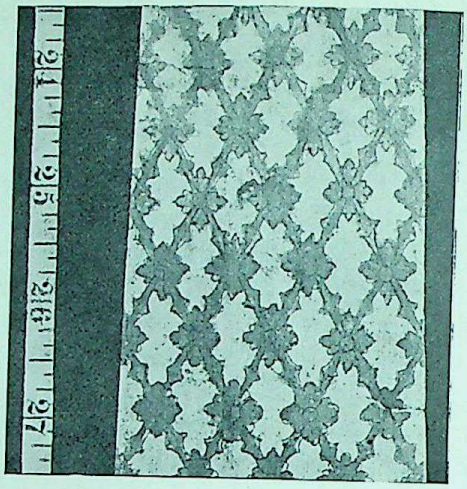


Fig. 21. Floral trellis, Sinhalese drawing, XVIIIth century.

of court patronage, while the motifs under consideration belong to the folk art of all India, and more especially the south and Ceylon. To take the particular case of the swastika, we have direct evidence that it was known in India at an early date, in the fact that it is referred to by Pānini[1]. And finally, if this assemblage of Early Asiatic decorative motifs was not known in India, let us say in the sixth century B. C., what decorative art can then have existed, and where are the traces of it? It could not have been utterly forgotten.

Thus I conclude:

(1) That the seemingly archaic motifs in modern Indian decorative and folk art are actually survivals from the 'Early asiatic' of at least 2500 years ago, and it is quite likely that many of them were already in India by the middle of the second millennium B. C. — not a very improbable view, as it is certain that some had already reached China.

(2) That the larger part of the oldest motifs reached India by a northern route or routes — *via* the Caucasus and Baktria on the one hand, and *via* the Persian Gulf or Persia on the other. By the Caucasian route there must have been rather free communication, to make possible the migration of so many identical motifs, and an assemblage of motifs so clearly representative of a definite stage or stratum in the evolution of design. Whether these motifs reached India from the Aegean, or as seems more likely, at least in some cases, from common sources in Western Asia, can hardly be determined.

(3) There is little evidence for direct communications with Egypt at an early date.

[1] As pointed out by Goblet d'Alviella, loc. cit. p. 104.